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Disaster Relief: Material and Spiritual

May 22, 2008 in [Tales from Taiwan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

Last night, the members of one of the Buddha's Light International Association (國際佛光會) relief teams returned to Taiwan, most in tears due to the horrifying devastation they had witnessed. They also reported a disturbing new development: an increasing number of survivors are starting to take their own lives.

To a certain extent, this should not be too surprising. Inland earthquakes often devastate economically deprived regions, where the livelihood of most people hangs by a thin thread even before a disaster strikes. This was the case for Taiwan's 921 Earthquake, which was also followed by a rash of suicides. Now that China is reasserting its control over the media, the extent of this problem may prove difficult to ascertain, but certainly it will be horrendous, especially since so many families have lost their only children in the rubble of shoddily-constructed "tofu schools". Sensing that the future has been lost, grief-stricken survivors will be even more like to commit suicide.

Now that the original shock of the disaster and the euphoria of dramatic rescues have passed, it is time for all concerned (and especially the Chinese government) to turn their attention to this problem. Counseling will be essential, including spiritual comfort. This is where religious organizations can play a vital role. As I noted in a response to Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley's post, one potentially important difference between current and past disaster relief in China involves the role of religious organizations in providing aid. During the late Qing and early Republican eras, not only Christian missionaries but also Buddhist organizations as well as "redemptive societies" like the Red Swastika Society (世界紅卍字會) and the Unity Sect (一貫道) were at the forefront of numerous relief efforts, a role that has been perpetuated in Sichuan by Taiwanese groups like the Buddha's Light International Association, Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (佛教慈濟基金會) and Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山). The relief provided by these organizations does far more than address material needs; it also attempts to help survivors cope with the pain of suffering and death.

One example from my own research involves the renowned Shanghai philanthropist and lay Buddhist Wang Yiting 王一亭 (Wang Zhen 王震; 1867-1938), who helped lead a massive relief effort following the devastating Kantō 關東 Earthquake of September 1, 1923. Apart from arranging shipments of much-needed supplies, Wang also sponsored Buddhist services to pray for the souls of the dead and had a Bell for the Souls in the Dark Realm (the Underworld) (幽冥鐘) cast in memory of this tragic event, which was shipped to Japan in 1926. The grateful Japanese referred to Wang as a "bodhisattva" (菩薩), and he was granted an audience with Shōwa 昭和 Emperor that same year.

There has already been so much death. Governments, NGOs, and concerned individuals will now have to do their utmost to prevent more tragic loss of life.

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